

[French Stonecutters--Father and Son]

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FRENCH STONECUTTERS - FATHER AND SON

His long, lean face was the brown of outdoor living, and his tall body slender and [sinewy?]. Had he smiled to lift the weary droop of his mouth and chase the disturbing resignation from his eyes, you would have said his was a rugged, happy health. You felt instinctively that here was a sadness, a sorrow he might have hidden from your eyes a score of years back when he was 40 or 45 years old. Now his figure drooped its resignation to the world....

He sat on a rough square of granite beside a new garage watching a man hosing the car in the next yard. "He's my son," he said with a quiet pride in the fine body and wiry suppleness he had given the younger man. "He's the oldest. With his face turned from us, the way it is now, you'd almost think he was my age. There's more grey in his hair than it mine. It's the life he leads. Drinking, staying out half the night." Scorn tinged his low spoken words. "He doesn't know how to drink. None of these young fellows do. I've seen him make a week-long celebration of it, and then spend another week getting rid of a hang-over. He's lost his job twice because of that. Both times I managed to get him another. I'm well known in the sheds in Barre and Montpelier, I've lived here ever since I was sixteen. My folks came down from Quebec. I learned the trade those first years in Vermont, I've been working in the sheds ever since. I've a daughter who's married and settled in Taunton, Mass., and a younger boy who graduates from high school this [???"

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2 year. I'll see to it that this boy doesn't go into the sheds. I used to say that the oldest one, too, but he got into them just the same. After he quit school he [lazed?] around for a whole year. I don't believe he worked more than three weeks out of the fifty-two. I told him he ought to be ashamed of himself when he had such a fine, strong body. Well, he got a chance then to go in the sheds, and though I hated to see him doing that work, I know it would be better than loafing, it would make a working man out of him. He's still lazy. There are plenty of times during the year when the sheds close down from lack of work, so many times that a good worker complains. Whenever he wants to. We used to have arguments over it, but I've kept quiet the last few years. He's old enough now to know how he wants to live. I guess he'll never marry, he'll have to change his way of living if he does. Maybe he's wise in having a good time. I don't know. I've seen a lot of these stonecutters in my life. Maybe these younger ones are wise to cram their good times and wild times in a short space of years. I'll tell you something now that won't sound pleasant to you. I'm sick. My lungs. I kept working as long as I could. The doctor made me quit three weeks ago. He wanted me to go to a sanatorium then, but I wanted to see my youngest boy graduate. I was afraid if I went there they wouldn't let me out for the day. He graduates next week. The following week I suppose I will have to go.... Yes, I could stay home, we have no small children, but it would be too much of a strain of my wife, she's nervous and 3 excitable, besides the doctor says it will be better for me there. I've been thinking of it lots at night, when every one is asleep, I've been thinking how nice it would be to stay here at home without working for the whole summer. It's funny sometimes how little things will please you, little things you can have by raising your finger, and still you deny yourself their pleasure they might bring. Perhaps it's because down inside of you you know that in bringing you happiness it may be doing harm to those you care for. I guess that's why I've decided it's best after all to go to the sanatorium. A friend of mine up the street, he was a stonecutter years ago, went to California last year when he was told his lungs were bad. He's back home now and abed. I say it's a waste of money. It may drag your life out a few months more, but what good does it do anyone? You're spending money that your family could use after you're gone.

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“Yes, there are a great many French in the granite industry, both in the sheds and in the quarries. I'd say they were here before the Italian and Scotch. They heard of these 'granite mines' as they called them and they came down off their Canadian farms to find work. But, of course, the skilled ones were chiefly Italian and Scotch who'd learned the trade in their own country.... It's pretty hard to pass judgment on the French who came in the '20's. Yes, they were certainly strike-breakers, but there's two sides to the question. Most of them were men who had to have work, it was a 4 job to them. If the Union men wanted to keep them out of the industry, why did they teach these newcomers the trade? That's what they did. These French made money for the shed owners, they put out a lot of memorials, but they were plain work and of little beauty. The owners will admit today that that period was a thorn in the granite industry.

“I work in the Barre sheds but I live in Montpelier. We moved here from Barre five years ago. We're Catholics and my wife wanted the youngest boy to go to a Catholic high school. There was just the Catholic graded school in Barre. Well, it was a choice of the boy driving to Montpelier to school, or my driving to Barre to work. I decided I might as well be the one to get the early morning air. We didn't own the house in Barre so it made it simpler moving down here. No, we haven't made any plans for moving back now that the boy is graduating. My wife likes Montpelier, she likes her neighbors, and now that I'll be going to the hospital, having friends around her will be nice for her.”